

Gov't Unveils Creative Ireland Funding

FROM THE HOB

Paul Keating



BACK in the darkest days of 2009 when the economic bubble was bursting in Ireland with more storm clouds on the horizon, Ireland reached out to its diaspora.

Some of the brightest minds from the business and cultural worlds assembled in Farmleigh House in Dublin's Phoenix Park for an Irish economic forum much like the Davos gathering happening right now for the World Economic Forum.

Fingers like darts were aimed at the banking, real estate and government sectors for leading Ireland to the precipice of its economic meltdown.

Amidst the voices of discontent stood out a very prophetic opinion posed by filmmaker and director Neil Jordan, who said that Ireland's cultural sector never let the country down and if given the chance could be part of its return to normalcy and hopeful prosperity.

Ireland's recession and dislocation worsened over the next few years and the Brian Cowen led-government teetered and fell, but they still managed to pull off a significant initiative in allocating \$5.3 million to underwrite a cultural campaign for the full year of 2011. It was dubbed Imagine Ireland across North America.

Culture Ireland was founded in 2005 under the first chairman, Dr. Micheal O'Suilleabhain as a body that would offer financial support to Irish artists asked to present their work outside of Ireland.

Under its first CEO Eugene Downes, Culture Ireland boldly built a coalition of Irish artistic companies and artists to work with a wide array of presenters and venues overseas for the five-year tenure with Downes at the helm.

In those early days those types of connections were most easily made at the "hiring fair" known as the Association of Performing Arts Presenters held annually in January at the New York Hilton.

Downes, working with associate Christine Sisk (currently the director under chair Mary McCarthy), led a team of performing artists, theater and dance folks who wished to develop touring opportunities here.

The process evolved over a number of years, but the high cost of exhibiting and bringing people over on spec proved inefficient. Yet a number of firm and effective bridges were built and a number of partnerships developed which have proven very useful.

Last week in New York City we heard first hand of a marvelous and inspired new initiative announced last December in Ireland called Creative Ireland.

Taoiseach Enda Kenny along with Minister for the Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs Heather Humphreys, and Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform Paschal Donohoe unveiled the welcome program for Ireland's cultural stimulation and promotion in the National Gallery. It seems to have played to great reviews in Ireland, and based on what Humphreys shared with us last week, the same reaction should follow here.

There can be no more pleasant duty for a government minister than to travel to the cultural capital of New York with great news for 2017, and even some funds for the Irish Arts Center, and that was Humphreys' brief last week.

Arriving in time for opening night last Wednesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music of the revived Martin McDonagh play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* under the direction of Garry Hynes of the Druid Theater Company, Humphreys wasted no time in signaling a bolstered presence for Culture Ireland programming in America this year.

The Druid production will be at BAM until February 5 and is one of a host of artists and work that will benefit from an additional \$1.2 million increase in the normal budget this year thanks to the Creative Ireland initiative according to director Sisk, who accompanied Humphreys to New York.

Last Thursday night at the Irish Arts Center with board members Loretta Brennan Glucksman and Irish Consul General Barbara Jones in house – two of the center's strongest advocates – Humphreys paid a ceremonial visit to the West Side redoubt with two tasks to perform.

The Irish government had already decided to make another sizeable contribution to the center's capital building fund of \$1,060,000 to hasten the ground-breaking event later this year, and Humphreys had the check to deliver.

The Irish Arts Center has been Culture Ireland's formidable beachhead in New York for over a decade, providing vital entrée into the large and overwhelming cultural cauldron that is the Big Apple. So there was a little extra in the IAC holiday stocking this year, bringing the Culture Ireland support of programming in 2017 to around \$200,000, an increase of 40 percent according to Sisk.

With the Cybex Tire Shop moving out in February, symbolically a performance in May of playwright Enda Walsh's *Works* is to take place in the "new home" before it is demolished. Then begins the two-year reconstruction project designed by Ireland's Office of Public Works as additional support from the Irish government.

At this point some folks might be wondering why the Irish Arts Center is showered with all this attention and funding. While their headquarters at 553 West 51st Street may be humble and diminutive, their programming prowess



Irish Consul General Barbara Jones, Minister Heather Humphreys and Origin Theatre founder George Heslin at last week's Creative Ireland launch. (Photo by James Higgins)

and fundraising skills are exceptional, punching way above its weight, just like Ireland has with its cultural influence around the world.

They think and work outside the box for their own benefit and that of Culture Ireland, who can avail of their outreach to other cultural gems in New York City like BAM, St. Ann's Warehouse (now in their own new home) and the Baryshnikov Arts Center where programming will be shared this year thanks to the increased support.

That kind of collaboration also was a key part of Humphreys' main mission to New York.

On Friday morning at the Irish Consulate on Park Avenue, Humphreys delivered her keynote address outlining the aspirations of the new Creative Ireland initiative. It was just a year earlier that Ireland's Foreign Minister Charlie Flanagan addressed a similar crowd of leading New York cultural and organizational activists to roll out the multi-faceted program arranged at home and abroad marking the centennial of the 1916 Rising.

Tremendously successful in every way as a unifying mechanism, the Irish government determined that the legacy of the 2016 celebrations should be an even more bold and ambitious approach to placing Ireland's culture and heritage once again in the fore front.

John Concannon, who oversaw the centennial programming, has been repositioned now as director to execute the Creative Ireland scheme with \$5.3 million in hand the first year to lift it off the ground.

Humphreys laid out the broad strokes of the Creative Ireland program 2017-2022 (Clár Éire Ildánach) in optimistic measure with a reassuring

confidence that the government with the same level of enthusiasm, cooperation and collaboration of the people of Ireland and the diaspora could achieve the most significant results of this generation.

She told us of the five pillars drawing from the rich Irish culture, with the first providing every child in Ireland the chance to engage in culture first hand, stoking their creative potential. Every county in Ireland will be given resources to enable creative programs and collaborations across departments and entities is the second pillar.

Third would be the investment in the creative infrastructure and institutions nationally and locally to support the efforts. Fourth would be to build on the blossoming success of the film and television production sector to make Ireland a center of excellence and draw even more creativity. The fifth pillar would be to establish Ireland internationally with a determined emphasis on its cultural strength and vision that would attract more people to want to experience it and participate in its cultural heritage.

It is premature to worry about whether this is all achievable and at what cost. We are in a new year so optimism is at its height now. Leaving the last words to Humphreys that she conveyed to me in a private conversation.

"Culture is in our DNA and the people really embraced our 2016 commemorations and that sense of pride was a real unification for our citizens and there was a real hunger to continue it."

"And sometimes it is not always about money as we discovered this past year with people working collaboratively together and showcasing what we have in a well-being initiative that benefits all."